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UNDERSTANDING AND CATEGORISING SOCIO- GOVERNANCE PROCESSES IN MARINE PROTECTED AREA MANAGEMENT

SCIENCE BRIEF

BLUE4ALL PROJECT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) play a vital role in conserving marine biodiversity and sustaining coastal livelihoods. As global commitments call for a rapid expansion of MPA networks, the challenge lies not only in designating new areas but in ensuring that MPAs are governed effectively, fairly, and with lasting support. This science brief introduces a goal-based framework categorising social and governance processes within MPA management. The framework helps managers and decision-makers to understand how engaging stakeholders contributes to MPA governance objectives and where they tend to lean toward top-down or bottom-up management approaches. By linking governance goals with practical processes and tools that support decision-making, the framework guides MPA management to be adaptive, inclusive, and grounded in both ecological priorities and the social realities that determine long-term success.

WHY THIS MATTERS

MPAs are growing globally as a key instrument to conserve marine biodiversity and secure the sustainable use of marine resources. However, many MPAs continue to struggle with insufficient stakeholder engagement, questions of legitimacy, and limited enduring support. Traditional management has tended to under-address the social aspects of governance, leading to measures that can prove ineffective or disputed in practice.



The approach presented in this brief offers a clear, goal-based pathway for addressing the social dynamics that shape MPA governance. It helps managers and decision-makers to:

- Recognise key governance challenges and their underlying social processes;
- Understand how these processes influence management outcomes;
- Choose the right tools and know when to apply them in the management cycle;
- Promote decision-making that is inclusive, adaptive, and transparent.

CATEGORISING GOVERNANCE PROCESSES

MPA management is made up of a range of socio-governance processes, which are the ways in which decisions are discussed, negotiated, implemented, and revised. Each of these processes serves a distinct purpose and naturally leans more toward either a top-down or a bottom-up approach depending on the governance objective. While top-down processes (such as setting regulations or enforcing boundaries) provide authority and direction, bottom-up processes (like co-designing management measures or building stewardship) strengthen legitimacy and trust. In practice, effective MPA management relies on a sequence of both types of pro-

cesses, combining clear guidance with active collaboration. The framework presented here helps managers and decision-makers organise socio-governance processes according to the objectives they serve. This categorisation offers a structured way to understand how social and governance processes interlink and influence each other. It clarifies where directive measures are most suitable and where participatory approaches are essential, supporting the selection of tools that fit each task and enhancing both the effectiveness and credibility of management decisions.

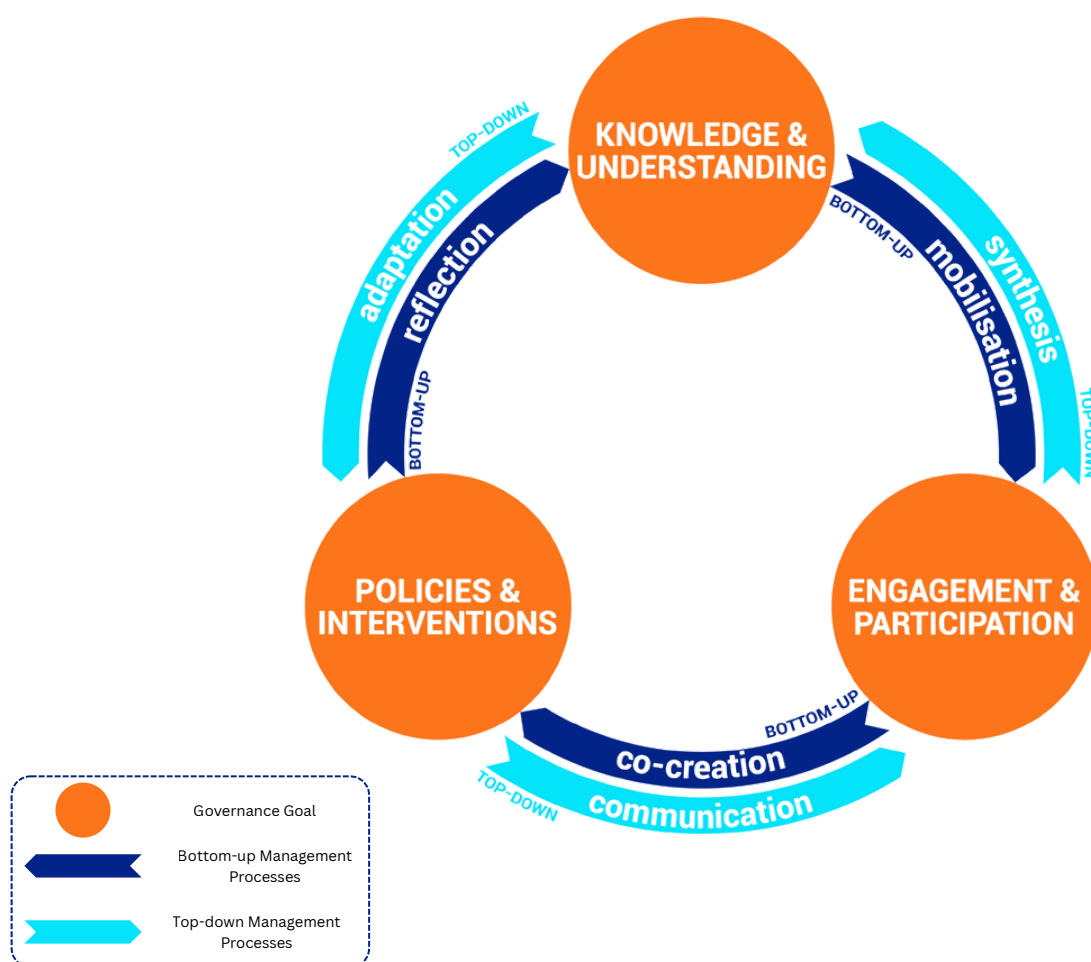


Figure: Goal-based framework for categorising socio-governance processes in MPA management



GOVERNANCE GOALS

K&U

Knowledge and Understanding: Shared interpretations, values, identity, culture and perspectives that shape how the MPA and its social-ecological context are understood.

P&I

Policies and Interventions: Inclusive and trusted collaboration among all stakeholders in decision-making.

E&P

Engagement and Participation: Formal and informal measures that translate management aims into concrete conservation outcomes.

BOTTOM-UP MANAGEMENT PROCESSES

Mobilisation

The process by which stakeholders' locally rooted knowledge, values, and identities are embedded in the organisation and engagement process.

Co-Creation

A participatory process where shared knowledge and collaboration lead to new or revised management measures and approaches, building trust and uptake.

Reflection

The process of assessing how management affects local knowledge, values, and practices, leading to new understanding that can be used in the MPA management process.

TOP-DOWN MANAGEMENT PROCESSES

Synthesis

The integration of scientific, local, and experiential knowledge through dialogue and learning to create shared understanding.

Adaptation

The process of applying learning from social and ecological outcomes to adjust policies and interventions.

Communication

The exchange of information about management decisions that maintains transparency and supports mutual understanding.

APPLYING THE FRAMEWORK

Once management processes have been identified and categorised according to their objectives, the framework can be used as a practical guide to plan, assess, and refine management actions. It is designed to help managers and decision-makers navigate the interlinked social and governance dimensions of MPA management in a structured but flexible way. The steps below outline how to apply the framework in practice.



1. IDENTIFY THE PROBLEM

Identify the issue that has prompted concern and made intervention necessary.

Example setting: In this case, an MPA was previously established through a collaborative co-creation process in which managers and local fishers jointly agreed on the MPA's spatial boundaries. Early support was high because fishers expected the measures to deliver future benefits for their businesses. After some time, however, they began asking when these positive impacts would become visible, signalling emerging doubts and a potential decline in engagement.



2. DEFINE A STARTING POINT

Determine a clear management goal or the governance process that requires attention, and locate it within the categorisation framework. The framework is open-ended - there is no single entry point.

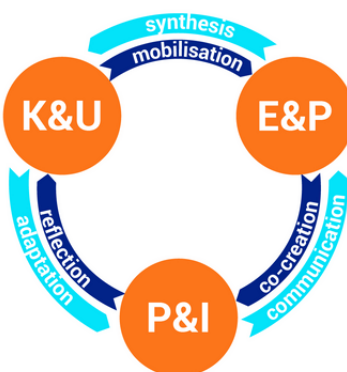
Example goal: The main goal was to keep fishers engaged in the management process, so the starting point lay within the Engagement & Participation pillar.



3. ANALYSE AND SELECT TOOLS

Assess how different activities or tools can influence sociogovernance processes and reshape stakeholder engagement. Each tool can intervene in, or give shape to, a specific process; more complex tools may correspond to several processes; and tools/activities can be applied in sequence to achieve comprehensive social and ecological outcomes.

Example: Communication with fishers alone did not hold engagement because local evidence was limited and recovery timelines were uncertain. As a potential next step, managers discussed shifting towards **mobilisation** (K&U → E&P) by arranging a peer exchange with fishers from a neighbouring MPA where benefits were already visible, before returning to **co-creation** (E&P → P&I) to jointly design local monitoring to track outcomes.



4. ITERATE AND ADAPT

MPA management is inherently non-linear and adaptive. Goals, relationships, and external conditions evolve over time, requiring managers to revisit the framework, shift between processes, and refine their approach.

REFERENCE TO SCIENTIFIC PUBLICATION

Buitendijk, T., Adjei, M., Raatikainen, K. J., Carballo Cárdenas, E. C., Varjopuro, R., & Schuitema, G. (2025). *A goal-based typology of sociogovernance processes in the management of marine protected areas*. Ocean & Coastal Management. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ocecoaman.2025.107948>.

GRAPHIC DESIGN

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